FORT EGBERT NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK VIRTUAL TOUR

INTRODUCTION:

"A forty-mile walk over a rough wintry trail, in forty below zero weather with a forty-pound pack of grub and blankets on his back left the prospector without poetry in his soul, but with a keen appreciation of the distance traveled…." – Judge James Wickersham, Eagle, Alaska, 1899.

In August 1896, rich gold deposits were discovered in Bonanza Creek, a remote tributary of the Klondike River near Dawson City, Yukon, Canada. The Klondike was so remote that it took nearly a year for news of the discovery to reach the United States. Once news of the strike did reach San Francisco and Seattle, "gold fever" exerted a tremendous pull on thousands of people. The Klondike Gold Rush was underway, and over the next several years as many as 40,000 prospectors would struggle with the remoteness, rugged topography, and harsh environment of the Yukon in an attempt to find their fortune.

For most prospectors, the long trek to the North Country offered little reward. By the time most arrived in the Yukon, the major mining claims of the region were already established. Many prospectors, unhappy with strict Canadian mining regulations and the lack of available claims in the Klondike area, moved west along the Yukon River to the Alaska Territory. Soon, reports of miners threatened by starvation and lawlessness along the Yukon River made it to the U.S. The Army developed plans to create a number of forts in the area to keep the peace, including Fort Egbert on the Yukon River.

By the time the Army arrived to begin construction of Ft. Egbert in 1899 the town of Eagle had already been established with a chamber of commerce, board of trustees, and a recorder. Many trading companies and businesses had also been established. Additionally, the Han Indian settlement of Eagle Village was located just a few miles upstream. The lives of whites and Indians, soldiers and civilians, and traders and miners were interwoven in the remote, rugged, and harsh Alaska wilderness. Today, the small, isolated, community is preserved much as it was in 1899 and offers a rare glimpse into Alaska's past.

MAIN TEXT:

Nearly 20 years before the Army arrived, on a large bend in the mighty Yukon River, Xavier Mercier established a fur trading post for the Western Fur and Trading Company. The Belle Isle Trading Post took advantage of the flourishing fur trade that had been developed in this remote, but wildlife-abundant, area of Alaska with the Han Indians.

However, for most of its early history the Fort Egbert area was dominated by the pursuit for gold. In 1886, Howard Franklin discovered gold on the Fortymile River, 50 miles south of the future site of the fort. The Klondike Gold Rush between 1896 and 1898 set

off one of the most dramatic events in the history of the Yukon Territory and Alaska. When Captain Patrick H. Ray recommended a fort be built near the mouth of Mission Creek, a group of American miners moved from the Klondike to the proposed fort site and quickly established the city of Eagle.

In 1899, Fort Egbert's mission was to protect the interests of the United States government on the Canadian/Alaskan border, aid the safety and welfare of the U.S. citizens involved with the gold fields, maintain law and order, construct roads and trails, and establish a communications system. The post was named in honor of Brigadier General Harry C. Egbert, who was killed in the Philippines campaign in 1899.

The following year, a civil and criminal code was established for the Alaska Territory. Judge James Wickersham established a court for the Third Judicial District in Eagle. Before construction of Fort Egbert could be completed, the military's jurisdiction over civilian activities ended. The military personnel at the fort were soon assigned a new mission: they would help construct an "all-American" telegraph line from Eagle to Valdez.

Ironically, just as the military mission quickly changed, the fate of Eagle also changed. Eagle seemed destined to become the transportation and commercial hub of interior Alaska. However, most of the miners and Judge Wickersham's court moved with the gold fields further west in Alaska. Those who remained in Eagle were increasingly dependent on their ties to Fort Egbert for survival.

The War Department believed the Army needed good communications to be effective in a setting as vast as Alaska. The Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System (WAMCATS) would connect the scattered military outposts in Alaska with the outside world. Lieutenant William "Billy" Mitchell was brought to Fort Egbert to expedite the construction. Over the next two years, Mitchell would oversee completion of WAMCATS and become one of the most celebrated figures in the history of Fort Egbert.

BILLY MITCHELL VIDEO:

The sudden explosion of settlement following the Klondike Gold Rush greatly increased the U.S. military's role in Alaska. Before completion of the telegraph line, all military communications were accomplished by horse, mule, riverboat, dogsled, snowshoes, or sleigh.

WAMCATS would bring the "outside" to interior Alaska. The idea was simple: create a telegraph line from Nome on the west side of the state to Eagle on the east side. From Eagle/Fort Egbert, the line would run south to Valdez. From Valdez, an underwater line would run all the way to Seattle, Washington. Underwater telegraph lines were already a proven technology; lines had been laid between the East Coast of the United States and Europe. It seemed the bigger feat would be the completion of the lines across the

interior; no one had ever attempted such a venture in the harsh, remote, and wild conditions of Alaska.

As might be expected, initial work on the WAMCATS project was quite slow. In fact, progress was so slow the first year that the Chief of the Signal Corps appealed to Lieutenant William "Billy" Mitchell to travel to Alaska and survey the conditions and report his findings. The exploits of Billy Mitchell would become legends in the story of Alaska.

After making his investigatory trip in 1901, Mitchell returned from Alaska convinced that the line could be built more rapidly if the soldiers worked throughout the winter. Before Mitchell's arrival, very little work had been done at Fort Egbert during the winter. The cold, dark, Alaskan winters were feared by most of the soldiers. Mitchell believed that if his men were well-fed, -clothed, and protected they could stand the cold weather. It turned out he was correct. The soldiers worked all winter clearing the right of way, transporting supplies, and laying the telegraph line. When summer came, and the ground thawed, they returned and set the poles in place.

Yet, many hardships were endured. Winter in Alaska was nothing to take lightly. Temperatures of minus 65 degrees Fahrenheit were not unheard of. A thermometer was of no use: mercury freezes solid at minus 40 degrees. The freezing points of several substances were used by early trader Leroy McQuesten to gauge the cold in interior Alaska: coal oil froze at minus 50 degrees, Jamaican ginger froze at minus 60 degrees, Perry Davis' painkiller froze at minus 75 degrees, and St. Jacob's oil never froze.

Billy Mitchell believed his men were better off not knowing how cold it was. "After awhile, I stopped all my men on the trail from having thermometers, because if they looked at them and saw it was 60 or 70 below, they would get to talking among themselves and not want to go out in the cold. As they were well-fed, -clothed, and protected, they could stand the cold weather, and as they had orders to work every day, irrespective of temperature, a thermometer with them was merely a nuisance."

Mitchell prided himself on his success in working through the long, cold winter. However, Mitchell knew firsthand the dangers posed by the harsh winter weather. During one of his scouting trips for the WAMCATS route, Mitchell came upon a mail carrier who was not very lucky. "There in front of the tent was a sled, on which a man was sitting, with his head leaning over on his hands. In front of him, sitting immovable, was a large black dog…I called to the man but received no response, and going closer found that he was frozen to death. The mail was in the sled under him. Between his teeth was a match and between his knees was a box where he had tried to scratch the match when his hands had frozen."

Lieutenants Billy Mitchell and George C. Burnell met at Tanana Crossing, now Tanacross, on August 24, 1902, to complete the 420-mile Fort Egbert-to-Fort Liscum (Valdez) line. Mitchell made the last connection on the WAMCATS line connecting Nome and Eagle, southeast of Fairbanks on the banks of the Tanana River, on June 27,

1903. Three days later, funding for WAMCATS expired. Two thousand miles of wire stretched from Nome to Fort Egbert to Fort Liscum. Rather famously, Mitchell later wrote, "Alaska is now open to civilization." (END OF BILLY MITCHELL VIDEO)

MAIN TEXT CONTINUED:

At its height, the fort supported ten officers, 146 enlisted men, 19 horses, 61 mules, and 39 sled dogs, and had a total of 45 buildings with amenities such as a bakery, laundry, hospital, and gymnasium. Fort Egbert was no longer a primitive camp, but it was still on the edge of the frontier. The soldiers, civilians, miners, and native people who lived there were always confronted by the harsh realities of living in the interior of Alaska.

LIFE ON THE FRONTIER VIDEO:

In the fall of 1897, 28 miners and fortune-seekers crossed the Yukon River into Alaska Territory. They organized a community and named it Eagle after the birds nesting on the nearby bluff. Two years later, a population of 1,700 people called Eagle home. Hundreds of cabins and tents dotted the landscape. These early cabins were very primitive, built of unpeeled logs and measuring no more than 15 by 18 feet. Obviously, there were few luxuries.

Eagle's strategic location along the Yukon River made it the transportation, trade, and communications center of interior Alaska. The new city soon housed four trading companies, a post office, hotels, restaurants, a newspaper, and at one point ten saloons. Merchandising of supplies to the miners and prospectors was a vital part of Eagle's economy. The Alaska Commercial Company, North American Trading and Transportation Company, Alaska Exploration Company, and Seattle-Yukon Transportation Company all had flourishing trades.

Scores of riverboats vied to be a part of the profitable trade along the North's populated riverbanks. Mississippi-style sternwheelers traveled up and down the Yukon River operating an international trade route, visiting towns in the United States and Canada. Eagle was a major steamboat landing and supply hub and one of the primary ports for the river boats. The waterfront became the heart of activity in Eagle.

As access to the interior improved, some Eagle residents were able to bring more possessions and luxuries to the wilderness. Presbyterian minister James Wollaston Kirk freighted in a piano, baby organ, church bell, sewing machine, linen, china, silver, and books. Even with all the comforts of the outside, Kirk held his first church services in a saloon. Later, a log church was built along the banks of the Yukon River.

The passage of the Alaska Civil Code and the arrival of Judge James Wickersham in 1900 comprised another milestone in the settling of the North. Eagle was no longer under the jurisdiction of the Army at Fort Egbert. In January 1901, the city held an

election and voted to incorporate, making Eagle the first incorporated city in Alaska's interior.

Still, Eagle and Fort Egbert were very much remote frontier settlements. Distance and inclement weather would cut them off from the outside world for months at a time. Civilians and soldiers alike depended heavily on the people around them to cope with the isolation. Several social organizations, including The Arctic Brotherhood and Improved Order of Redmen Lodge, sponsored social events, dances, holiday parties, and memorial services.

For miners living out along the streams and rivers of interior Alaska, Eagle must have seemed like a metropolis. Thousands of hopeful miners endured unspeakable hardships as they toiled for gold in the Alaska wilderness.

After arriving in Eagle or one of the other surrounding communities, miners followed trails to different rivers and creeks in the area to stake their claim and start mining. Traveling was never easy. The miners were at the mercy of Mother Nature and the remote topography. Because of the hardships faced on the trail, most miners brought only what they could carry. To be successful, miners had to be resourceful and construct what they needed from materials that were available near their claim sites. The fortunate prospector could afford to have his gear and grubstakes freighted in by horse, dogsled, or boat. However, the cost of having goods delivered was often more than the cost of the items themselves, so only essential items were delivered.

Few miners were successful in their search for gold. More than a few died in their pursuits. Most left Alaska penniless and disheartened. Others stayed because they grew to love the land that had become their home.

George Pilcher, an "unsuccessful" miner summed up the sprit and conditions endured by the prospector in 1899 when he wrote, "I am at peace with all the world and am undisturbed by the sound from living mortals in my quiet home. I am simply supplied with every necessary comfort and have six grouse besides, yes, a basketful of eels. My health is perfect, not a pain or an ache or woe. I eat like a wolf, sleep like a babe and work like a tiger from dawn until dusk. My evenings are spent 'if at leisure' in either reading David Copperfield or else writing…The world is beautiful and Providence has my heartfelt thanks."

MAIN TEXT CONTINUED:

Just as it does today, technology moved quickly and in less than a decade the wireless telegraph replaced land lines. The infantry companies were no longer needed to maintain the telegraph lines, and Fort Egbert was expensive to maintain. In 1911, the infantry pulled out of Fort Egbert. All that remained was a small Signal Corps detachment to operate the radio station. When the radio station burned to the ground in 1925, the detachment withdrew and military life at Fort Egbert came to an end.

In 1970, Fort Egbert and the town of Eagle were recognized as being of national historical importance. They were designated a historical district and placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Between 1975 and 1979, a total of $432,000 provided for stabilization, preservation, and interpretive projects conducted by the Bureau of Land Management at Fort Egbert. In 2000, additional funds were acquired through a Save America's Treasure Grant to continue ongoing preservation and restoration work at Fort Egbert

RESTORATION VIDEO:

For nearly a century, Fort Egbert has been a reminder of Alaska's frontier past. Ties between the fort and the residents of Eagle remain strong. After the Army, and then the Signal Corps, abandoned the fort, many of the buildings located on the grounds were given a second life.

One of the homes built for non-commissioned officers was transferred to the U.S. Treasury Department and moved down to the riverbank, where it served as a Customs Service office and Residence to oversee trade on the Yukon River. Today, the Customs House contains exhibits developed by the Eagle Historical Society to interpret the Customs Service and the unique international trade that took place on the Yukon River.

Though many of Fort Egbert buildings were abandoned, sold, removed, or demolished, the fort's grounds were also put to new uses as the military withdrew their forces. The parade ground, where soldiers once assembled and trained, is used as an airstrip by local residents. Several of the old fort buildings were moved in 1932 to enlarge the field. By the mid-1930's, aircraft had replaced most of the dog teams that had previously carried freight and mail up and down the Yukon River and out to the many mining camps in the wilderness.

Over the years, the remains of Fort Egbert began to lose their battle with the harsh Alaskan environment. Except for the granary, the five remaining structures on the grounds of the fort had suffered significant structural damage. With help from the Eagle Historical Society and the Alaska Congressional delegation, the Bureau of Land Management obtained funds to repair faulty foundations, roofs, and walls, and to preserve a piece of Alaskan history.

One of the first buildings to be constructed when the army arrived in Eagle was the quartermaster storehouse. This oldest surviving structure at Fort Egbert was built in 1899 and was used to store a six-month supply of food for the soldiers and civilians living at the fort.

In the mule barn, some of the mules' names still hang above the stall doors, a vivid reminder of the importance of mules and horses to people on the frontier. Today, the barn houses exhibits on many frontier activities, including mining, agriculture, dog

sledding, and trapping. At one point, nineteen sled dog kennels had been added to the south side of the stables to house Billy Mitchell's teams of dogs, which he used to explore and mark hundreds of miles of telegraph lines across the wilderness.

When the Army arrived at Fort Egbert, they supplied all of the buildings with water delivered in large tanks on horse-drawn wagons or sleds. The enclosed waterwagon shed was built with sliding doors through which the water wagons or sleds were driven each night. This kept the water in the tanks from freezing during the long winters. Today, visitors can see exhibits on the early trail and road projects that helped open Eagle to the outside world. There are also a number of antique vehicles, including Ford Model T and B pickup trucks and a rare Jeffery Quad all-wheel drive vehicle from 1911. The granary was built in 1903 to store precious grains shipped to Fort Egbert via Yukon River steamboats. Strangely, the granary also housed a bowling alley prior to the construction of the fort's gymnasium.

The remaining non-commissioned officers' residence is a wonderfully crafted example of Swedish architecture. In 1902, it was occupied by the post quartermaster and the hospital steward. The home displays period furnishings from the Fort Egbert era. In 1999, the BLM entered into a partnership with the Eagle Historical Society and Museums for a Save America's Treasures (SAT) grant for continued restoration of the building. SAT grants help preserve America's most significant cultural treasures. The ongoing restoration of the home's interior will preserve as much of the original materials as possible and provide insight into daily life in Alaska over 100 years ago.

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With the completion of the Taylor Highway in 1953, Eagle became accessible to automobiles. Most visitors still arrive by plane and riverboat, but for much of the year the adventurous traveler can now visit this town at the end of the road.

More than 100 years after its establishment, Fort Egbert and the Eagle Historic District retain their unique and charming atmosphere and allow the visitor to share in this small but authentic chapter of Alaska-Yukon history.